

**Adoption in North Dakota
Report to the State Auditor**

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Executive Summary

Every child welfare agency that performs adoptions has two very contradictory responsibilities. First, they must recruit as many prospective adopters as possible. But they also must screen out those who cannot or should not adopt - for reasons ranging from felony convictions to unresolved fertility issues. The critical factor in balancing recruiting and screening is when and how the screening starts. Successful states recruit first and screen later. Less successful states place the emphasis on screening. North Dakota appears to strike the appropriate balance. The training and home study process appears to be designed to prepare families to be foster parents or to adopt. The system welcomes all candidates to enter the process, makes the standards clear, and screens for criminal background later in the process. During the process parents are challenged to decide whether they have the skills and temperament to be successful. It is natural, and a positive outcome, when prospective parents make the difficult decision that this is not right for them.

According to both workers and participants, there appears to be very little attrition as prospective parents move from initial call through training and placement. Not all attrition of parents is bad and it appears that attrition in North Dakota happens for the right reason- that prospective parents decide that adoption (or foster care) is not right for them. What is most important is that **all** prospective parents leave the process feeling that they have been treated fairly.

One of the most striking results of our focus groups was the overwhelmingly positive feelings prospective parents had about the agencies they worked with and with their adoption workers. Workers in North Dakota appear to view every family as a valuable resource and go the extra mile to ensure that every family feels welcomed. This is the single most important attribute that any adoption system can have.

Still North Dakota's adoption program does have some problems, most of which are related to the unique climate and geography of the state. A prospective parent in Minot may have to wait for a year or more to enter the P.R.I.D.E. training program. Training groups may not have the number of people required to build a supportive group environment. There are no easy answers to these kinds of questions. North Dakota appears to do the best it can to adapt its adoption services to the characteristics of the state and its people.

There are two areas in which North Dakota can, and should, focus its improvement efforts. First, the level of paperwork required of adoptive parents needs to be reduced. The technology is readily available to address this issue in a relatively inexpensive way. Foster care and adoption programs can share data, forms be computerized-families can either fill out forms on line or paper forms can be "pre-filled" with data already collected.

The second area for improvement is more complex, but much more important. The state needs to provide more support for families after they adopt a child from foster care.

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Every child adopted from foster care has, by definition, suffered incomprehensible loss. It is magical thinking to believe that adoption, by itself, can fix a broken child. Even children adopted by the best prepared, most loving, family will probably need services to address the losses and trauma of their early childhood. North Dakota needs to commit itself to providing those services to children and families. This includes ensuring that adoption subsidy payments are uniform throughout the state, that services are available for children in need of intensive psychological treatment or hospitalization, and that families can access services for their adopted children without relinquishing custody to the state. Finally, North Dakota must eliminate the practice of requiring families to pay child support when their adopted children require residential treatment. This requirement, with enforcement by the state's child support enforcement program, is a clear disincentive to parents wanting to adopt North Dakota's most vulnerable children and represents the greatest barrier to the adoption of children from foster care.

Why it Matters: The Case for Adoption- There are countless studies that demonstrate the benefit of adoption, not just to the child, but also to society. In contrast, the results for children who leave foster care without being adopted are stark. In a study of children who had "aged out" of foster care, researchers found that within 12 to 18 months of turning 18 and leaving foster care, 27% of males and 10% of females were incarcerated, 50% were unemployed, 37% had not finished high school, 33% received public assistance, and 19% of females had given birth to children.¹

Practices that promote adoption also have financial benefit to society. Mary Eschelbach Hansen, a Professor of economics at American University, has recently published a paper on the economic value of adoption. According to Professor Hansen's research, each adoption nets between \$88,000 and \$150,000 in private benefits (higher lifetime incomes earned by the adopted relative to those raised in long-term foster care) and \$190,000 to \$235,000 in total public benefits (child welfare and human service costs). **Thus each dollar spent on the adoption of a child from foster care yields between \$2.45 and \$3.26 in benefits to society.**²

¹ Federal statistics quoted at <http://statistics.adoption.com/information/adoption-statistics-foster-care-1999.html>

² **The Value of Adoption** by Mary Eschelbach Hansen American University Department of Economics Working Paper Series No. 2006-15 December 2006

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Introduction

Adopting a foster child from a public child welfare agency in the U.S. is by no means a simple process. Individuals who contact a public agency in hopes of adopting a child often have little or no information about what the process entails. The public agencies whose task it is to find adoptive families for foster children report budget limitations, staff turnover, and other bureaucratic hurdles. Prospective adoptive parents are a varied group of individuals—some are married couples who have struggled for years with infertility; some are same-sex couples wishing to parent children together; others have biological children and either wish to parent a less fortunate child, or have remarried and wish to parent a child with their new spouse; some applicants are single and wish to parent a foster child. They also represent a range of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds.

Seeking a “permanent” home for a foster child is one of the most important goals of the child welfare system. Administrators, supervisors, and workers in public child welfare agencies know their mandate and take their job seriously. Adoption is permanent. For foster children who are not able to return to their biological parents, adoption workers want the very best. They want an adoptive home that can best meet the needs of the child.

The adoption process has many steps. First, an individual or couple seeking to adopt a child must hear about the children available through the public agency. We refer to this as recruitment. Then the prospective parent contacts the adoption agency. Once contact has been made there are several steps that agencies require, including meeting certain standards (e.g., criminal clearance, housing), completing an application, attending training sessions, and participating in in-person interviews to assess their home environment and suitability as adoptive parents (i.e., home study). At each of these steps, paperwork must be completed. The final step in the process is matching a child with a family. In an ideal world, the adoption process would be smooth and have few or no delays. The sections that follow provide details about each of the steps in the adoption process, how they are organized in North Dakota, how parents perceive the process, and recommendations for improvement.

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Recruitment

Background

Every child welfare agency that performs adoptions has two very contradictory responsibilities. First, they must recruit as many prospective adopters as possible. But they also must screen out those who cannot or should not adopt - for reasons ranging from felony convictions to unresolved fertility issues. The critical factor in balancing recruiting and screening is when and how the screening starts. Successful states recruit first and screen later. Less successful states place the emphasis on screening.

Findings

Recruitment of adoptive parents and foster parents in North Dakota is always done together. Agencies doing the recruitment include AASK, REACH, and PATH. It should be noted that 89% of all adoptions from foster care in North Dakota are foster parents adopting children in their care.

North Dakota has a small population of waiting children who have no identified adoptive parent. At any given time, there are no more than 10-15 children in need of adoptive parents. The greatest need is for parents to adopt Native American children. The state does have at least one recruiter located on a reservation.

Recruitment of adoptive and foster parents in North Dakota is accomplished through a wide range of efforts, including

- Word of mouth
- Billboards
- Church bulletin announcements
- Public Service Announcements- Radio, TV, newspaper ads
- Native American special project.
- Recruitment at Fairs and other places where prospective parents might gather
- Public events and awards to celebrate Adoption Awareness Month and Foster Care Month.

Mirroring national findings, staff finds word of mouth to be the most effective tool for recruiting parents. Church bulletin announcements were also considered to be very effective. Staff understands that the decision to adopt is not one made lightly. The decision can take years to make. Therefore, saturation is important. Even if there are not immediate results each marketing effort contributes to the eventual decision to go forward and builds a climate that supports adoption..

Adoptive parents are involved in recruiting and training parents throughout the process. They participate in:

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- Information meetings
- Inquiry meetings
- P.R.I.D.E. training
- REACH program
- Special events as Adoption ambassadors.

The use of foster and adoptive parents throughout the process conforms to best practice, creating an environment that welcomes prospective parents and encourages them by showing them examples of success.

Recommendations

- The Adoption Ambassadors program has great potential for recruiting and supporting adoptive parents. According to staff, the program has not reached its potential. Greater resources should be put into developing the Adoption Ambassadors program.
- Burleigh County received a grant for recruitment of Native American families. Calls resulting from this recruitment effort go directly to the county. However, there are concerns about how Burleigh County handles initial calls (see Initial Call Section). Therefore, either Burleigh County must improve the way it handles initial calls or calls from this recruitment effort should go to a private agency.

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Initial Call

Background

The first information call can be an intensely emotional experience for the prospective adoptive parent. The path that leads to adoption frequently involves frustration and loss – not finding the right partner, infertility, illness, miscarriage, failed infertility treatments. The first contact with an agency must be treated in this context. When making their first inquiry, applicants need to obtain accurate information and be treated well. The initial call requires great sensitivity. The first person to speak with prospective parents should be professional staff with a background in counseling and specialized training in adoption.

Finding

When a prospective parent calls to inquire about adopting a child from foster care in North Dakota, they are likely to reach a welcoming, knowledgeable person in short order. The emphasis during the first phone call is on recruitment- explaining the process, answering questions, and creating a positive connection.

100% of prospective parents surveyed agreed with the statement, “When I initially contacted the public agency, workers were informative and responsive to my questions and concerns.” This is a remarkable finding.

North Dakota, like any state with a small population, has an inherent limitation. In most instances, there is only one adoption expert responsible for handling calls in each jurisdiction. Even with diligent staff, vacation, illness or other events may make it inevitable that some people have to wait before they can speak with the right person. What North Dakota’s system lacks in scale, it compensates for with caring staff that make a strong personal connection with callers.

The system appears to do a good job of sharing information so that information is forwarded to the counties and someone calling a central number does not get lost.

The material that is sent to all callers is attractive, informative, and welcoming.

Apparently private agencies are more likely to be responsive to callers than public agencies. Several parents we spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with their initial contact with Burleigh County.

Illustrative Quotes

“Honestly, I don’t think we could have gotten more help when we did call with questions. At least at AASK they were very quick to let us know what we needed to do.”

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“It was pretty amazing actually – when we first talked Kathy. I made the first phone call after getting the information from our social worker Pat. She was so excited about us wanting to adopt a foster child and she thought that was pretty neat...She was wonderful.... Got all the information that she needed from both of us and the day after we got a packet in the mail that was completely detailed. I didn’t have to call her with any questions because she had it all – I don’t know how she had time to sit down and put that many sticky notes on there – but we didn’t have any questions after that – well we did but not about the paper work.

“To become a foster parent was awful. My experience with Burleigh County has been awful. I can’t say all of them. [My child’s] social worker has been strange since day one. And that has been two years now. But we have worked with other social workers at Burleigh County and they have been terrific. I just think that the one that we have just is in the field for the wrong reasons. I don’t know. I make a phone call and it takes three and one half weeks to return a phone call.”

“Now the day I called Kathy, I could not give her any more praise – she is wonderful and she has been wonderful through this whole thing. The whole adoption part has been great.”

“My very first phone call [to Burleigh County] that day was – I called and I said, my husband and I have been interested in becoming foster parents and it took about a week to get back to me..and then I would say about a week and half before we got any information in the mail about it. And I even said I would drive up and get the stuff because I am running errands non-stop. But Burleigh County and ASK have been completely different. [from each other]”

“My first phone call to ask for the adoption was terrific. She answered absolutely every question that I had. She sent me a packet within one or two days. She was on top of all of our meetings. She was great.

Recommendations

- There should be further assessment of the intake process at county offices to insure that prospective parents are welcomed and that follow-up information is sent promptly.

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Inquiry Meetings

Background

Once prospective adoptive parents connect with the public or private agency, they are instructed on the next steps in the process. This is often referred to as the orientation process and incorporates attendance at an Inquiry Meeting and completion of an application form. This is also the stage of the process in which agency officials are likely to provide more information about the types of foster children available for adoption.

Findings

All prospective parents who call for information are supposed to be invited to an Inquiry Meeting. However, because of travel difficulties, bad weather, and small numbers of people signed up for meetings, the Inquiry Meeting is often replaced by a less formal explanation of the adoption process.

The Inquiry Meeting lasts between 1½ to 3 hours. The length of the meeting is determined by the number and scope of the questions asked. The Inquiry Meeting includes a description of the adoption process, a video that gives a sense of who the available children are, distribution of newsletters with child-specific information, and discussion of the challenges and rewards of adopting a child from foster care. The fees for adoption are discussed and, at the end of the meeting, applications are distributed to those who want one. There is no screening done at this meeting. Its purpose is to draw prospective parents into the process.

The invitation process:

- Prospective parent calls for information
- The prospective parent is told when the next Inquiry Meeting will be held.
- The prospective parent is sent a written invitation, and asked to RSVP.
- Prospects get invitations to 3 consecutive Inquiry Meetings, and then they are dropped from the invitation list

Inquiry Meetings appear to do a good job of welcoming families and answering all their questions.

Illustrative Quotes

“It was a lot of information. They answered every question that you could imagine – I got a lot out of that meeting.”

“Coming into the meeting more scared about the adoption from my part because we are white and our child is Native American. So I walked in just scared – didn’t know what to think. They were going to tell me, no you can’t do this – I’ve heard horrid stories – but

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they answered so many questions for us and actually made us feel good leaving. They made us feel like the adoption thing would go very well for us.”

Recommendations

1. The process for follow-up should be amended so that callers receive invitations for **two years** after their initial call. The decision to adopt a child is extremely difficult and can happen over a period of years. It is common for prospective parents to wait a year or more between their initial call and attending an information meeting.
2. All prospective parents should receive a follow-up telephone call before the first Inquiry Meeting held after their initial call.
3. All prospective applicants should receive a telephone call before being dropped from the invitation list.

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Training

Background

While recognizing the need to present prospective parents with a realistic view of the challenges they will face, applicants need a balanced perspective in the training sessions. In national studies, parents often feel like the training is designed to “scare off” some parents.

Findings

North Dakota uses the P.R.I.D.E. training model, which is designed to train both foster parents and adoptive parents together. The P.R.I.D.E. training uses a training team consisting of a social worker, an adoptive parent, and a foster parent. Training participants appreciate the value of having experienced parents as part of the training.

The P.R.I.D.E. training is designed to consist of 27 hours over a 9-week period. Weekly meetings are designed to build a sense of community and support among participants. In North Dakota, this structure is the exception not the rule. Given the weather conditions and the distances participants often must travel, the P.R.I.D.E. training is more often conducted in intensive weekend blocks. While not as conducive to group building, and perhaps other goals of the P.R.I.D.E. training, this is a reasonable accommodation to the unique characteristics of the population served.

To address the difficulties of weather conditions and the distances participants often must travel, North Dakota is experimenting with IVN (interactive video network) training. This would allow trainers and prospective parents to do some of their training remotely. While not ideal, this is also a reasonable accommodation to the unique characteristics of the state.

In Fargo, There is no P.R.I.D.E. training in summer because trainers are paid \$1,500 extra (\$500 per trainer) in the summer.

P.R.I.D.E. training is designed for groups of 8 to 10 couples or individual prospective parents. In smaller communities it is very difficult to put together the minimum sized group of 8 couples. As a result, at the time of this report, there are people in Minot (and presumably other communities) who have waited for 2 years to enter a P.R.I.D.E. training class. These prospective parents are unable to move forward until they have completed the P.R.I.D.E. training.

P.R.I.D.E. training in North Dakota appears to prepare parents for the difficult challenges of parenting a child that has been abused or neglected without unnecessarily scaring parents. Using experienced adoptive and foster parents from the very beginning of the training is central to this goal.

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100% of all those who completed the training agreed with the statement *“The training sessions have been helpful in preparing me to adopt a child.”* There is no better judgment possible of the training program in North Dakota.

Illustrative Quotes

“With that training I felt that some of that could have been done...on the Internet – a lot of that could have been done then and some of the discussion groups could have been done at that meeting.”

“I can honestly tell you that when I took PRIDE training being a foster parent now for more then a few years, I haven’t used a whole lot in fostering. I guess I’ve always had the theory that when these children come into my home, I treat them as though they are my children. I don’t treat them differently, I involve them in everything, I give them the time that they need to adapt and we have never had an issue with any of our foster children. And the way they teach you to try to be a foster parent – ...I know you have to follow their guidelines and that is fine – but a lot of the ways that they persuade you to do it – its just take them in and love them. That’s all that half of them need is just love.”

“We had a couple of teenagers that were very troubled and there were times that if I hadn’t referred to – because of the process that you have to deal with when you have a child you can’t meet them head on. So I learned a lot of that through that – how to get around their emotions without meeting them head on. With infants or little ones it is totally different – but when you get older kids with troubles you do need a little bit of guidance there to know how they are feeling because you don’t know where they have come from or what they have been through.”

“Well we watched a lot of film strips... I think a lot of it is conveyed that they do have the abnormal past. They bring out a lot of things that you wouldn’t think of. A lot of things that came up where it basically asked me, what can you handle? Like defecation on the floor or a child that is going run away, things that you in your wildest mind think what would this child do. And they are coming to you with experience saying this is what they have done. Like a 12 year old pregnant girl – I mean things that you would never dream of hearing that you may be bringing to your door. They tell you this is what you may end up with, can you handle it?... I don’t think it scared us off. I think that I was actually – okay there were a couple of things that I said, no I couldn’t do that. I was very honest and they were glad for that because they then let people know, okay this is something that she wouldn’t want.”

“I was dreading it, but it really wasn’t so bad.”

“I think they do a very good job.”

“It was a lot to take in at one time.”

“Overwhelming”

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“It needs to be done. You need to go through that training. It would be good to have a refresher after you’ve had kids for a while. Especially when we got to the AASK part- I don’t remember a thing from our training.”

“There’s a lot that I didn’t realize when I started the first time because it is overwhelming, a lot of information so I think about it, it comes down to the PRIDE trainers, realizing what kind of stuff really stands out so I just try to help them take certain areas, highlight certain areas, remind them that’s a source to go back to and look at constantly so they realize that there’s a lot of valuable information, sometimes you just have some good training and the book is thrown on a shelf butthere is a lot of a good stuff if social workers are asking, a person can go back and kind of just refer them to look at but now they do, in their questions that they, when they go back, we have to renew your adoption paperwork, it’s changed a little bit so they do go through each section of the PRIDE book, not physically with you but each appoints a topic when they ask questions upon that. So that’s kind of nice.”

“We had an infant – so some of it I was – oh this doesn’t pertain to us – when we got our seven year old – which we never were going to do – we had a zero and four when we got our seven year old and I was so thankful that we got the realistic view of what could happen because a lot of it did.”

“The [training] team consisted of a social worker, an adoptive parent and a foster parent. And also I think a staff member. That was really great, because some of the adoptive parents stories that we got to hear –An adoptive parent who had been a foster parent for over 20 some years and he was very helpful. Because a lot of the stories that he shared that people wouldn’t normally share – they make you think about, can you handle this? Is this something that you want to do – this is not just a baby in a blanket. There is a lot more to it then that.”

“Then at the very end, the girl that was adopted she came in and spoke about what her experience of being adopted and stuff and what it was like. And that was really neat to have an adult child come back and say, this is what I got out of it. She was very pleased to be adopted.”

“She came to our meeting to and I thought she was very powerful. She really – I never had [thought] a lot [about] adopting until I heard her experience – of how good it was for her. Even though I have an adopted brother and growing up with him – it was so different to hear from a different aspect of somebody who had been in an abusive situation.”

Recommendations

1. Training should be offered in the summer months. Given the relatively small window of time when climate is not an issue, it seems like an unnecessary waste to not provide P.R.I.D.E. training in July and August. The \$1,500 saved per

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training group does not begin to equal the cost savings and public value of children in foster care achieving permanency sooner.

2. Given the inherent difficulties of conducting weekly group trainings in a rural state with harsh weather. North Dakota should continue to experiment with different training structures and technologies such as video conferencing.
3. Many parents find a long gap between when they take the training and when they need it. North Dakota should offer a series of workshops or refresher courses for adoptive parents. This training should be conducted by the same staff that do the initial training. In addition to helping adoptive parents do a better job, it would likely have the added benefit of encouraging more of North Dakota's experienced adoptive parents to adopt again.

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Home Study

Background

There are several purposes for the home study, including understanding the family in order to make a determination about its suitability as an adoptive family, learning enough about the family to be a successful advocate for it if the application is approved, educating the family about the types of children available, and probing the feasibility of expanding the range of types of children the family feels capable of taking. The home study also has the potential to be a source of conflict and stress. It takes place in the family's home and parents often feel judged. For that reason, it is critical that the family's adoption worker develop a trusting, positive relationship with the family.

Findings

Prospective parents felt very positively about the worker who did their Home Study. They felt comfortable about questions being asked and felt that their worker was professional and confidential. Many were effusive in praising their worker. There seemed to be a real bond between the families and their AASK worker.

The Taylor-Johnson test was generally seen as providing accurate information and useful insight into the relationship of a couple. Some described it as fascinating. However, some couples found that the Taylor-Johnson gave insight that was more marital than parental. These parents did not see it as being useful in predicting parenting behaviors or providing insight into better parenting.

Families felt that the finished product (the Home Assessment) was an objective look at the prospective family and seemed to be very accurate.

For both relative adoptions and second adoptions, prospective parents felt that the process was too rigorous and expressed the desire for a more streamlined process.

Illustrative Quotes

Kathy played with [our child].... she entertained him while we trying to do our paperwork. She brought him little packages.

"Honestly, I couldn't have asked for anybody better to come into my home. She was, we have two out-of-control dogs that most people complain when they come to our house because they are just out of control and she was, no big deal, you know, you don't need to lock them up and she was just great. She always worked around our schedule that was convenient for us. I made her flavored coffee when she came in, I made lots of brownie points, I don't know."

"Yes, we had a contract gal, she contracted and she was wonderful. She came one night to meet with our kids...She actually had our youngest draw pictures to kind of get her to

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explain how she felt about things and I thought it was great. She sent us a copy of it. 'Let me know if you want me to make any changes or what ever'. We didn't have any changes. Yes, she really listened. Yes, she did. There were some things, it was like, wow we shared that much, she picked up a lot."

"Our caseworker was fabulous and it went smoothly."

"I was amazed that she picked up on so many things. We were just amazed."

"She would come to our home if we wanted her too or we could come here or wherever and she was very welcoming and asked questions and we felt comfortable in everything."

"At first it was a little bit uncomfortable but we had so much contact that got better each time we met and having talked it over and you helped, --- was compassionate they were, our worker was wonderful and our new worker is the same way."

"And how much our little one that we are adopting likes the dogs and what he likes to play with. I mean, you know, from monitoring him in our home, she was able to put that in there and I was very impressed, very impressed"

Taylor-Johnson Test

"The results are fascinating."

"Yeah, they came to me after I done that and we did it for our daughter and they came in and said, 'I think you are fighting some kind of addiction' and just about dropped my drawers. And I looked at them and said, I quit smoking. And they said, 'that's what we figured'. From that darn test they could tell that. I – I mean it is amazing."

"It was like amazing – then you think what were they asking – how do they know this information."

"It was more marital then parenting and how we click rather then how we would interact with children."

"I think it is a valuable tool."

"I think it give a clear picture of who you are. Who that couple is."

"I would say it was accurate, I would say. But for couples."

Recommendations

- Recognizing that not all adoptions are the same, consider instituting a waiver process to allow a more streamlined home study process in certain circumstances. This could be applied for families that have previously adopted a child from

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North Dakota (and beyond period where the home study can be updated), families that have adopted a child from another state, or relatives adopting children in their family. For example, in some circumstances, the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis may be excessive in working with a family that has previously adopted 3 children from foster care or a couple adopting their niece.

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Matching

Background

The process of matching children and families is handled very differently around the United States. In some locations, parents are encouraged to be active participants, looking through photo listings of waiting children, searching the Internet, and contacting their worker to express interest in specific children. In other locations, the process is more “worker driven.” Workers do the matching based on their understanding of each family’s preferences and families are discouraged from active participation.

While there may be good reasons to make matching a primarily worker-driven process, there are more reasons to involve parents in the process. Parents grow and develop throughout the process and the very process of considering different waiting children serves an important function in preparing the family to adopt. Strong parental involvement also sends a strong message to the prospective parent that they are valued partners with their adoption agency.

Findings

89% of all adoptions of children from foster care in North Dakota are foster parents adopting their foster children. This provides continuity for children, less disruption, and a quicker path to adoption. With so few available children in North Dakota, very few parents are matched to children with whom they do not have a prior relationship. None of the families we spoke with had actually been matched with a child they did not previously know.

North Dakota’s system of matching children with parents strongly involves waiting parents. Prospective parents are regularly sent information on every waiting child in the state. They are strongly encouraged to be part of the matching process. This is an extremely positive approach.

Workers in North Dakota have both waiting children and adoptive families on their caseload. This can be a strong asset when matching children and families. AASK workers from all across the state meet together every month to match children and parents. This collaboration serves the state’s children well.

Workers in North Dakota take a broad view of their roles in matching children and families, correctly perceiving the value to society, and to North Dakota, in creating matches across state lines. Some state child welfare agencies hang on to “their” families and view each family only as a resource to children in their state. North Dakota understands the value of a system where children and families can be matched across state lines according to the needs of each child. The state is to be commended for its open attitude and practices.

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Illustrative Quotes

“But we don’t want to stop with just North Dakota kids because there are so many hundreds of children waiting in this United States alone. And they would all love North Dakota Mom and Dad. We all know that. We don’t want to stop there.”

“ We have enough numbers on our waiting list that they could cover all the children who are waiting in North Dakota. In this ideal world that they would be good..... and all. But we wouldn’t want to stop there.”

Recommendations

- Some states with smaller populations participate in regional adoption exchanges as a formal way to match children and families across state lines. If North Dakota does not participate in any formal exchange with neighboring states, it should consider interstate matching meetings with its neighbors, modeled after the monthly matching meetings it currently holds.

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Paperwork/Bureaucracy

Background

Transferring a human life from the care of the state to the care of an individual will inherently involve paperwork. Responses to questions must be documented. Federal law requires fingerprinting and criminal background checks. Families must give references.

Findings

Paperwork- There was consensus among families that more paperwork was required for adoption than for foster care. There was widespread agreement, among parents and workers, that the adoption process required too much paperwork and that much of it is redundant. Parents described it as overwhelming.

Many families complained that the adoption process required too many references (eight) and that references were sometimes asked questions they would not be able to answer i.e. asking an employer if the prospective parent had a lot of debt.

Families expressed the belief that paperwork for foster care and adoption should be the same and the history given for each process should be shared, so parents don't have to repeat it.

Fingerprinting- Families expressed great frustration with the process of fingerprinting- having to have separate fingerprints for foster care and for adoption, being fingerprinted each year, and slowness of fingerprint processing. Specific concerns mentioned included the slow transition to digital fingerprints, the belief that only two people in the state are responsible for processing fingerprints, and that the state might be "batching" fingerprints- slowing the process until a threshold number of fingerprints were ready to be processed.

Fees- The costs to adoptive parents are relatively inexpensive. Federal taxes can reimburse parents for these costs and provision is made for families that cannot afford the fees. However, a typical adopting couple may be required to write as many as 10 separate checks to cover costs of background check, fingerprinting, etc.

Illustrative Quotes

We had to do it three times [background checks] because we transferred our license and then we had to do it to become guardians through PATH and then we had to do it again. It was funny though because we were down at the Police Department three times in about 60 days. I think – after awhile you start feeling like, oh my goodness they know us by name. This isn't good. But we were very informed. She didn't hold back – she was like you guys have to go through this again for each agency because they can't transfer fingerprints. So for AASK they needed it. Then the reason we had to do it a third time

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was because we were transferring from PATH to Burleigh County – and we need to do it again just to get a Burleigh County license.

“The fingerprinting- ridiculous. I did it three weeks apart. I had to be re-licensed for foster care, and three week later I was back at the Police Department. They looked at me like I was a criminal. And then they weren’t able to read my husband’s so he had to go back a few days later and have it redone. So, that I think is ridiculous. For one thing, we have had the child in our home for two years... He’s already family. He’s our child. I mean, I understand they have to do it so secure so the children are going to good homes, I understand that and I am glad for that – but finger prints are awful and the background checks if they are that close together I don’t understand why we can’t transfer them. I can see like a year apart.”

“You kind of almost get discouraged about just ready to quit with all this paper work.”

“Some of that is redundant paper work and some of the questions I thought on there were confusing. I don’t know if I was reading more into them – but its like what do they want here? Do they want this, this, or this?”

“The one thing that I would say is what I would like to see changed – is to be dual licensed in the state of North Dakota. If you have family that is willing to provide foster care for any child – why do they make them choose between a private agency and county agency.... I’m talking about being licensed with both PATH which is a private agency and with Burleigh County which is county agency. If we can see one thing change- I don’t see why not let a family that is capable and willing and loving foster either the state or from a private agency. And in our situation they actually broke up a family that we had our niece whatever – she was already family and this baby just because they were a private deal.

While they are trying to do this chronologically they are doing this all at the same time – you are also doing paperwork for foster care at the same time as the paperwork which the foster care for us was more paperwork then the adoption was. We went through four times for each child and now we are doing number five....We have gone through it individually four times already by the same agency.

But you do the same paperwork over and over. Like we went in and got four sets of fingerprints – two for foster care and two for adoption at the same time. And signed papers for the background checks for each agency – you just keep doing the same thing over.

There are a lot of other things that they should share. Because the psychological testing and everything is just redundant. There is just so much stuff – references is another one- that we should be able to get together and see what has already been done so we don’t have to redo everything.

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“We wanted to do a nice thing – we wanted to adopt a child – we wanted to do this – after seeing the list of all the things we were going to have to do and we got to go to this two day thing – we’ve got to take all these tests – we have to do all this stuff and they want to know do we sleep in the same bed and everything else – its like more then we’re ready to do that. It sounds like it is going to take for ever and – to start over with a second child and our son was nine so we wanted to adopt a child close to the same age. It just seemed like there were going to be a lot of hoops and honestly we didn’t want to tell other people about – and the page of 8 references we would have been it right there.”

“To tell you the truth – I think the background checks yearly, are going to scare a lot of people off. Because I think that is ridiculous – I mean you go through a background check and finger print one year and they find out everything about you – what is the point of doing that every year?

“The paperwork- Like for foster – you fill out the same stuff every year – some of it is duplicate and I think PATH is trying to get some of it computerized so they might send out more that is pre-filled and might just have to say yes or no.”

“It’s like every year you do the same thing over again. Like you are licensed for one year and do it again and be continued licensed for the next year.”

“I think what is difficult – what I see and hear- is that a lot of us already had children in our home through foster care and we fell in love with them and you are doing that paperwork for them but then are we losing great families –to children who really need home. Because of the paperwork – because of different things that can be very overwhelming.”

“Since they have your fingerprint they can go in and see if you’ve been arrested in the past year with out you having to do anything. And if you had been arrested or you had gotten into trouble then you come and make you re-licensed.”

“There’s more paperwork through the AASK program than it was our infant adoption. I think we had to have like eight or nine references and I was just I mean, we had like four for our other adoptions and phenomenal and thenwe had eight.”

“Then if you go through the second time you have to redo everything [references] again. And we did the same references that we did the first time – so it was like okay what did I put down the first time – that’s the same and that’s the same. For them to do references again was just ...”

“They need to ask all kinds of things and really to find out who you are. It’s just the whole process – somehow should be more streamlined”

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Recommendations

- There are many ways to streamline the paperwork. Among them:
 1. The process can be computerized.
 2. Paper forms can pre-filled with information previously gathered.
 3. Paperwork for adoption and foster care can be designed for ease of transferability.
- **No prospective adoptive parent should ever be fingerprinted more than one time.** Going to the local police station to be fingerprinted more than once is worse than an inconvenience. It can be emotionally charged and demoralizing to prospective parents who may literally be fingerprinted 3, 4, or 5 times. While fingerprinting is necessary, and required by law, there are readily available ways to ensure that prospective parents are fingerprinted only one time. Foster care and adoption licensing agencies can share data. For annual updates, the applicant's record can be run using the fingerprint on file.
- Processing of fingerprints should be accelerated. This may require conversion to digital fingerprinting, adding more staff, or other remedies. In all likelihood, the value of speeding the criminal background check will far outweigh the cost to do so.
- The state should consider whether it is requiring too many references. If parents are correct in reporting that they are required to submit 8 references, then the value of references number 5-8 may be outweighed by the burden on families of getting so many references (and the burden on workers of reading them all).
- While the state should work very hard to reduce the paperwork burden for all prospective families, it should consider streamlined paperwork for families that have already adopted or families adopting their relative children. To ensure a rigorous process in cases where there is cause to question a family's suitability, access to this streamlined process can be granted through a waiver.
- Given the relatively minimal costs of adoption and the great public interest in placing children in foster or adoptive families, North Dakota should consider eliminating all costs to become foster or adoptive parents. Even if the state retains fees for fingerprinting and background checks, charging an application fee, however small, for people wanting to adopt children who are wards of the state seems like a symbolic barrier. North Dakota should consider a system where families are only required to write one check.

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Post-Adoption Services

Background

Throughout the United States, there is virtual unanimity on the need for increased services for families that adopt children from foster care. By definition, all children who have been adopted from foster care have, at best, suffered neglect. At worst, they have suffered some combination of physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Many have also spent much of their lives in the limbo of foster care. The five year old who has spent 3 years in foster care has spent the majority of her life without the basic security of a family. Families adopting children from foster care require a safety net of services to help their children overcome early trauma and loss.

Findings

There are two ways in which states support families after they adopt children from foster care. One is adoption subsidy and the other is post-adoption services. Like many states, North Dakota does not devote enough resources to supporting families after they adopt children from the state's child welfare system.

Adoption Subsidy

Adoption assistance in North Dakota appears to be applied inconsistently and be dependent on the "generosity" of County administrators. This is contrary to the intent of adoption assistance, which is to promote the adoption of children.

In North Dakota, a child may be designated as a child with "special needs" for the purposes of adoption subsidy if the child meets at least one of the following criteria. The child:

- is over the age of seven (7); or
- is a member of a minority race; or
- is a member of a sibling group that is placed together for adoption; or
- is diagnosed with a physical, mental or emotional disability; or
- has been determined to be at high risk for a physical, mental or emotional disability by a licensed physician.

According to the Federal Office of Management and Budget, "*The June 13, 1980 Senate final conference report on the enacted bill (HR 3434) represented bipartisan agreement on the bill's provisions. The plain language in this conference report indicates that Congress was interested in facilitating the adoption of 'hard-to-place children who might otherwise remain in foster care indefinitely.'*" *The Committee received testimony documenting the benefits of an adoption assistance program in providing a permanent home and family for children. Moreover, creation of a Federal adoption assistance program results in savings for both the Federal government and the States. Children who*

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are adopted are discharged from foster care thus ending costs related to case management, court appearances and the like that continue throughout the life of a foster care placement.”

Bearing the Cost of Post Adoption Services

North Dakota is unique. All states have a deficit in the level of services it provides to children adopted from its child welfare system, and to the families that adopt them. What makes North Dakota unique is that it *punishes* families that need post-adoption services.

It is extremely common for children who have been traumatized in their early years to require intensive psychological services, especially as they reach puberty. These services may include intensive counseling or psychiatric hospitalization. When families in North Dakota seek these services, they are punished in two ways. First, they may have to transfer legal custody to the state in order to access services they cannot afford. This is a great stigma to the family and removes responsibility from the parents just when the child is in his or her time of greatest need. The second way that North Dakota punishes adoptive families is that it assesses child support during the time when the child is in the legal custody of the state. North Dakota's Child Support Enforcement Program then aggressively pursues adoptive parents; parents who have given a permanent home to traumatized children at the moment of their greatest need.

The way North Dakota approaches post-adoption services represents a serious barrier to families considering adoption from foster care. It would be hard to overstate the level of disincentive that this provides to prospective adoptive parents.

Illustrative Quotes

“Standardize subsidies, increase adoption workers and county workers because it takes too long to, they have more things put on their plate than I think they can get done. They are always working on streamlining the foster care adoption home study process but it takes time and it takes resources and that slows the ...[process]

“I think subsidy is a huge, huge piece and it is so inconsistent across the state. You have a little town county out in western North Dakota and you have to fight tooth and nail to get subsidy for the child. That’s not right. There needs to be, that whole subsidy piece is intended to support a family so the child has permanence and some county directors act like that’s their own personal checkbook which is a real barrier.”

[We need a] “visitation center”

“ I can’t tell you how many parents I have had say to me, I am afraid to adopt because I will lose all the support that I have, in the system and if that happens, I don’t know if I could survive. They are willing to make that permanency connection but they are afraid. Because North Dakota virtually has noservices and adoption subsidy and post adoptive services are not a priority for legislature if anything they axed dollars this year

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in the legislature. And it puts all of our kids at risk because as we are doing more subsidized adoptions the pot pool of money gets smaller and even though a largest majority in North Dakota are 4E(?) you have a number that are private or non-4E funded and it sucks up that pool and we are at risk for all of our subsidies being reduced and that is a scary thought."

"I have had at least four legislators look at me and say, I've had any body pay me to raise my kids, why should I pay you to raise your kids."

Bearing the Cost of Intensive Post-Adoptive Services

"It's a nightmare. I've heard horror stories of the cost of it and the burden emotionally"

"It goes back to post-adoption services – it goes back to priority of funding within the state. North Dakota child support is very aggressive in.. pursuing child support payments."

Crying- "I have a child right now – and this is very emotional – and residential is 15 – 16 grand a month – I can't afford that. And to have her live in a residential I have to give up my parental rights. In order to do that – at that point then I'm assessed child support because she then becomes a ward of the county. Legal custody goes with the county – our parental rights are not terminated but we no longer have the legal right to say what happens to her. And by doing that – that is how I access a funding stream to get her the treatment that she needs. But then child support comes back and says, okay now you owe us this many dollars a month in child support because she is now in custody – and it is based on our income. That's not right. I adopted this child in good faith...and I'm looking at having to pay child support in order to get her what she needs. I can't afford it. And that is not right. It's more expensive to take kids in foster care then it is to have an adoption – but adopted parents need to be able to excess the services they need for children and our state policy makers are oblivious to that."

"That is one of the biggest reason why we were very afraid to adopt the one we adopted – because mentally there are a lot of issues there and puberty is a roller coaster ride for us. And I am a little worried about her mental state once she reaches that. But I don't not want to adopt her either – I mean that is not an option."

It is still a foster [rather than adoption] because it is really nice to have the backup like I needed today...We want to adopt her. In the four years she has come a long long way, but there are still anger issues where it is nice to have the back up. To be able to call and have someone say let me talk to her or – so I mean if there were more things like that available with the adoption to would be nice.

"There are a lot of things because even like for her, I went to a seminar a couple of months ago – if we adopt her before she turns 14 – when she turns 18 there is nothing available to help her. If we adopt her after she is 14 – she could get some assistance once she becomes an adult to live on her own. So that kind of scares me because – when

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I first got her – and she is a very brilliant young lady – but she has suffered some. She is going into 8th grade and functions on third grade level... But there has to be something to help”.

“Yeah, we still are going to do it [adoption], we want to do it – it’s just that it’s her behavior that is kind of holding us back a little bit. I’m thinking maybe until like next year. Probably after she is 14 or 15 when hopefully she has matured a little bit more in her behavior – where her behavior is a little better where we don’t feel like we need to have the social worker back us up. Or like she was told today – our emergency plan is if she can’t control herself she needs to go to the hospital and that was just reinforcing with our social worker – well if I have – the adoption, I don’t have that backup. So we lose things by adopting that could just help us help her.”

“It’s not like we don’t want to adopt her because – I mean she lists her last name as our last name – she has been with us for four years she is very much a part of our family. We include her in everything that we do. But I can see some drawback especially after I had gone to that last seminar and learned that when she turns 18 she may be dependent on me for an awfully long time. Which if she’s my daughter that is what I need to do, but I need to be able to help her”.

Recommendations

It is magical thinking to believe that adoption, by itself, can fix a broken child. Even children adopted by the best prepared, most loving, family, will probably need services to address the losses and trauma of their early childhood.

- North Dakota should undertake a study, with the active involvement of adoptive parents, to assess the existing level of post-adoption services in the state and develop a plan for meeting the service needs of families after they adopt a child from foster care.
- Adoption subsidy should be standardized so that children have equal access to adoption, regardless of their county of residence.
- The requirement that families transfer custody to the State in order to receive intensive services for their adopted children should be eliminated.
- The practice of assessing child support payments to families when their adopted child is receiving intensive post-adoptive services should be eliminated.